



## D. A. Carson: The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God.

"Let me sum up:

In the first chapter I outlined some factors that make the doctrine of the love of God a difficult thing to talk about. Some of these are cultural; others are bound up with the challenge of trying to integrate the many varied and complementary things the Bible says about the love of God. Further, what does such love look like in a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, sovereign, and transcendent (i.e., above space and time)?

Then I briefly outlined five different ways the Bible speaks of the love of God -

1. his intra-Trinitarian love,
2. his providential love,
3. his yearning and salvific love that pleads with sinners,
4. his elective love,
5. and his conditional love -

and indicated what could go wrong if any one of them is absolutized. p45

To sum up: Christian faithfulness entails our responsibility to grow in our grasp of what it means to confess that God is love.

It is easy to see what will happen if any one of these five biblical ways of talking about the love of God is absolutized and made exclusive, or made the controlling grid by which the other ways of talking about the love of God are relativized.

I draw your attention to five distinguishable ways the Bible speaks of the love of God. This is not an exhaustive list, but it is heuristically useful.

(1) The peculiar love of the Father for the Son, and of the Son for the Father. John's Gospel is especially rich in this theme. Twice we are told that the Father loves the Son, once with the verb [in] John 3:35), and once with [another verb in] (John 5:20). Yet the evangelist also insists that the world must learn that Jesus loves the Father (John 14:31). This intra-Trinitarian love of God not only marks off Christian monotheism from all other monotheisms, but is bound up in surprising ways with revelation and redemption.

(2) God's providential love over all that he has made. By and large the Bible veers away from using the word love in this connection, but the theme is not hard to find. God creates everything, and before there is a whiff of sin, he pronounces all that he has made to be "good" (Gen. 1). This is the product of a loving Creator. The Lord Jesus depicts a world in which God clothes the grass of the fields with the glory of wildflowers seen by no human being, perhaps, but seen by God. The lion roars and hauls down its prey, but it is God who feeds the animal. The birds of the air find food, but that is the result of God's loving providence, and not a sparrow falls from the sky apart from the sanction of the Almighty (Matt. 6). If this were not a benevolent providence, a

loving providence, then the moral lesson that Jesus drives home, viz. that this God can be trusted to provide for his own people, would be incoherent.

(3) God's salvific stance toward his fallen world. God so loved the world that he gave his Son (John 3:16). I know that some try to take kosmos ("world") here to refer to the elect. But that really will not do. All the evidence of the usage of the word in John's Gospel is against the suggestion. True, world in John does not so much refer to bigness as to badness. In John's vocabulary, world is primarily the moral order in willful and culpable rebellion against God. In John 3:16 God's love in sending the Lord Jesus is to be admired not because it is extended to so big a thing as the world, but to so bad a thing; not to so many people, as to such wicked people. Nevertheless elsewhere John can speak of "the whole world" (1 John 2:2), thus bringing bigness and badness together. More importantly, in Johannine theology the disciples themselves once belonged to the world but were drawn out of it (e.g., John 15:19). On this axis, God's love for the world cannot be collapsed into his love for the elect.

(4) God's particular, effective, selecting love toward his elect. The elect may be the entire nation of Israel or the church as a body or individuals. In each case, God sets his affection on his chosen ones in a way in which he does not set his affection on others.

The people of Israel are told, "The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deut. 7:7-8; cf. 4:37). Again: "To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today" (10:14-15).

The striking thing about these passages is that when Israel is contrasted with the universe or with other nations, the distinguishing feature has nothing of personal or national merit; it is nothing other than the love of God. In the very nature of the case, then, God's love is directed toward Israel in these passages in a way in which it is not directed toward other nations.

(5) Finally, God's love is sometimes said to be directed toward his own people in a provisional or conditional way - conditioned, that is, on obedience. It is part of the relational structure of knowing God; it does not have to do with how we become true followers of the living God, but with our relationship with him once we do know him. "Keep yourselves in God's love," Jude exhorts his readers (v. 21), leaving the unmistakable impression that someone might not keep himself or herself in the love of God. Clearly this is not God's providential love; it is pretty difficult to escape that. Nor is this God's yearning love, reflecting his salvific stance toward our fallen race. Nor is it his eternal, elective love. If words mean anything, one does not, as we shall see, walk away from that love either.

Jude is not the only one who speaks in such terms. The Lord Jesus commands his disciples to remain in his love (John 15:9), and adds, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain - remember to obey his precepts" (Ps. 103:9-11, 13, 17-18). This is the language of relationship between God and the covenant community.

If the love of God is construed entirely within the kind of discourse that ties God's love to our obedience (e.g., "Keep yourselves in the love of God"), the dangers threatening us change once again. True, in a church characterized rather more by personal preference and antinomianism than godly fear of the Lord, such passages surely have something to say to us. But divorced from complementary biblical utterances about the love of God, such texts may drive us backward toward merit theology, endless fretting about whether or not we have been good enough today to enjoy the love of God-to be free from all the paroxysms of guilt from which the cross alone may free us.